

**Thomas Jefferson to Joel Barlow, October 8, 1809, from
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Ford.**

TO JOEL BARLOW J. MSS.

Monticello, October 8, 1809.

Dear Sir, —It is long since I ought to have acknowledged the receipt of your most excellent oration on the 4th of July. I was doubting what you could say, equal to your own reputation on so hackneyed a subject; but you have really risen out of it with lustre, and pointed to others a field of great expansion. A day or two after I received your letter to Bishop Gregoire, a copy of his diatribe to you came to hand from France. I had not before heard of it. He must have been eagle-eyed in quest of offence, to have discovered ground for it among the rubbish massed together in the print he animadverts on. You have done right in giving him a sugary answer. But he did not deserve it. For, notwithstanding a compliment to you now and then, he constantly returns to the identification of your sentiments with the extravagances of the Revolutionary zealots. I believe him a very good man, with imagination enough to declaim eloquently, but without judgment to decide. He wrote to me also on the doubts I had expressed five or six and twenty years ago, in the *Notes of Virginia*, as to the grade of understanding of the negroes, and he sent me his book on the literature of the negroes. His credulity has made him gather up every story he could find of men of color, (without distinguishing whether black, or of what degree of mixture,) however slight the mention, or light the authority on which they are quoted. The whole do not amount, in point of evidence, to what we know ourselves of Banneker. We know he had spherical trigonometry enough to make almanacs, but not without the suspicion

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of aid from Ellicot, who was his neighbor and friend, and never missed an opportunity of puffing him. I have a long letter from Banneker, which shows him to have had a mind of very common stature indeed. As to Bishop Gregoire, I wrote him,

as you have done, a very soft answer. It was impossible for doubt to have been more tenderly or hesitatingly expressed than that was in the *Notes of Virginia*, and nothing was or is farther from my intentions, than to enlist myself as the champion of a fixed opinion, where I have only expressed a doubt. St. Domingo will, in time, throw light on the question.

I intended, ere this, to have sent you the papers I had promised you. But I have taken up Marshall's fifth volume, and mean to read it carefully, to correct what is wrong in it, and commit to writing such facts and annotations as the reading of that work will bring into my recollection, and which has not yet been put on paper; in this I shall be much aided by my memorandums and letters, and will send you both the old and the new.¹ But I go on very slowly. In truth, during the pleasant season, I am always out of doors, employed, not passing more time at my writing table than will despatch my

1 The following are Jefferson's notes on fifth volume of Marshall's *Life of Washington*:

“ *The practicability of perpetuating his authority,*” &c. I am satisfied that General Washington had not a wish to perpetuate his authority; but he who supposes it was practicable, had he wished it, knows nothing of the spirit of America, either of the people or of those who possessed their confidence. There was indeed a cabal of the officers of the army who proposed to establish a monarchy and to propose it to General Washington. He frowned indignantly at the proposition, (according to the information which got abroad,) and at Rufus King and some few civil characters, chiefly (indeed, I believe, to a man) north of Maryland, who joined in this intrigue. But they never dared openly to avow it, knowing that the spirit which had produced a change in the form of government was alive to the preservation of it.

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Page 28. The member of Congress here alluded to was myself, and the extracts quoted, was part of a letter from myself in answer to one General Washington wrote. (See both.) General Washington called on me at Annapolis (where I then was a member of Congress), on his way to the meeting of the Cincinnati in Philadelphia. We had much conversation on the institution, which was chiefly an amplification of the sentiments in our letters, and, in conclusion, after I had stated to him the modifications which I thought might remove all jealousies, as well as dangers, and the parts which might still be retained, he appeared to make up his mind, and said: "No! not a fibre of it must be retained—no half-way reformation will suffice. If the thing be bad, it must be totally abolished." And he declared his determination to use his utmost endeavors to have it entirely abolished. On his return from Philadelphia he called on me again at Annapolis, and sat with me until a very late hour in the night, giving me an account of what passed in their convention. The sum of it was that he had exerted his whole influence in every way in his power to procure an abolition; that the opposition to it was extreme, and especially from some of the younger members; but that after several days of struggle within doors and without, a general sentiment was obtained for its entire abolition. Whether any vote had been taken on it or not, I do not remember; but his affirmation to me was, that within a few days (I think he said two or three) it would have been formally abolished. Just in that moment arrived Major L'Enfant, who had been sent to France to procure the Eagles, and to offer the order to the French officers who had served in America. He brought the King's permission to his officers to accept it, the letters of thanks of these officers accepting it, letters of solicitation from other officers to obtain it, and the Eagles themselves. The effect of all this on the minds of the members was to undo much of what had been done; to rekindle all the passions which had produced the institution, and silence all the dictates of prudence, which had been operating for its abolition. After this, the General said the utmost that could be effected was the modification which took place, and which provided for its extinction with the death of the existing members. He declined the Presidency, and, I think, Baron Steuben was appointed. I went soon after to France. While there, M. de Munier, charged with that part of the *Encyclopedie, Methodique* which relates to *economic politique* and

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diplomatie called on me with the article of that dictionary, "Etats Unis," which he had prepared ready for the press, and begged I would revise it and make any notes on it which I should think necessary towards rendering it correct I furnished him most of the matter of his fifth, sixth, eighth, ninth, and tenth sections of the article "Etats Unis," with which, however, he intermixed some of his own. The ninth is that which relates to the Cincinnati. On this subject, the section, as prepared by him, was an unjust and incorrect Philippic against General Washington and the American officers in general. I wrote a substitute for it, which he adopted, but still retaining considerable of his own matter, and interspersing it in various parts.

"In a government constituted," &c. Here begins the artful complexion he has given to the two parties, Federal and Republican. In describing the first by their views and motives, he implies an opposition to those motives in their opponents which is totally untrue. The real difference consisted in their different degrees of inclination to Monarchy or Republicanism. The Federalists wished for everything which would approach our new government to a Monarchy. The Republicans to preserve it essentially Republican. This was the true origin of the division, and remains still the essential principle of difference between the two parties.

current business. But when the weather becomes cold, I shall go out but little. I hope, therefore, to get through this volume during the ensuing winter; but should you want the papers sooner, they shall be sent at a moment's warning. The ride from Washington to Monticello in the stage, or in a gig, is so easy that I had hoped you would have taken a flight here during the season of good roads. Whenever Mrs. Barlow is well enough to join you in such a visit, it must be taken more at ease. It will give us real pleasure whenever it may take place. I pray you to present me to her respectfully, and I salute you affectionately.